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**THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH OFFERS TIPS  
FOR A HEALTHY SCHOOL YEAR**

(RICHMOND, Va.)—It's that time again. In just a few weeks, kids across the state will be headed back to start the school year. To help get their children off to a good start, parents can check out the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) annual "Back to School, Back to Health," publication in most major newspapers across the state this Sunday, August 6. The eight-page tabloid insert offers important health information in both English and Spanish. Inserts will also be available at all local health departments and can be accessed online at [www.vdh.virginia.gov](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov).

The publication's topics include suggestions on how to promote good dental health, the importance of nutrition and physical activity in school performance, and preventing illness through proper immunizations.

A new Virginia law requires that children enrolling in the sixth grade this fall receive one dose of Tdap vaccine, which protects against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis. Tetanus, also called lockjaw, causes painful tightening of the muscles in the body. It can "lock" the jaw preventing the sick person from opening his mouth or swallowing. Diphtheria causes a thick covering in the back of the throat and can lead to breathing problems, paralysis, heart failure and death. Pertussis, also called whooping cough, causes coughing spells so severe that eating, drinking or breathing become difficult. It can last for weeks.

Health experts know that parents play a key role in shaping their children's behaviors and helping them make healthy choices. Here are 10 ways parents can set a good example, promote good health for their children and improve their likelihood for success in school:

- **Practice Preventive Health** – Schedule regular check ups with your doctor and dentist. Keep immunizations up to date and make sure that children with diabetes get a flu shot every year. Prevent the spread of germs and viruses by teaching children to cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, to wash their hands thoroughly and often, and to avoid touching their eyes, nose or mouth. Keep them home when they are sick. More helpful tips are available at [www.vdh.virginia.gov/pandemicflu](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/pandemicflu).
- **Work with Your School** – Share important medical information with the school nurse and develop a health care plan for children who take medicine regularly or have a chronic health condition. Ensure that the school has a plan to deal with natural or man-made emergencies. Visit [www.injuryfreeschoolsva.org](http://www.injuryfreeschoolsva.org) for resources on injury prevention in schools.
- **Teach Internet Safety** – Teach your children to never give out identifying information, such as their name, address, phone number or school name. They should never respond to messages that are suggestive or belligerent or make them feel uncomfortable. Know the online services your child uses and whether you can block objectionable material. Find other online safety guides for parents and children at [www.i-safe.com](http://www.i-safe.com).
- **Eat Healthy Foods** – Good nutrition equals good grades. Start every day with a good breakfast. Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, drink plenty of water and avoid foods and drinks that are high in sugar. Keep healthy snacks on hand. Visit [www.mypyramid.org](http://www.mypyramid.org), an excellent resource for nutrition information. Work with the school to provide healthy menus in the cafeteria and healthy snacks in vending machines.

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- **Be Active Every Day** – Being physically fit helps kids look, feel and do their best. Help them plan to sit less and move more. Urge children and adolescents to be physically active 60 minutes every day. One way is to limit TV and computer time to two hours a day. After tenth grade, girls are twice as likely as boys to be inactive. Visit [www.girlshealth.gov/](http://www.girlshealth.gov/) for information on how to put the Go in Go-Girl-Go.
- **Prevent Tooth Decay** – Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease among Virginia children and may affect self-esteem and schoolwork. Kids should have regular dental check ups and brush at least twice a day, before school and bedtime, with fluoride toothpaste. Limit sugary snacks and drinks, and provide healthy snacks that include fresh fruit and crunchy vegetables. Ask your dentist about dental sealants to protect the chewing surfaces of back teeth from decay.
- **Provide a Safe Environment** – Bike helmets reduce the risk of brain injury by 90 percent. Car safety seats and safety belts are a must. Lock guns away and store ammunition in a separate place. Supervise children on playgrounds and around water. Visit [www.vahealth.org/civp](http://www.vahealth.org/civp) for injury prevention information. Don't allow smoking in your car or home. According to the U. S. Surgeon General, there's no safe amount of second hand smoke.
- **Protect Emotional Health** – On average, two Virginia youths die each week from suicide. Warning signs include feelings of hopelessness, rage, withdrawal from friends and dramatic mood changes. For more on signs and ways to help see "About Suicide" at [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org). For warning signs of teen depression visit [www.safeyouth.org](http://www.safeyouth.org).
- **Talk and Listen to Your Children** – Kids say their parents have the most influence on the choices they make. They want to know what you think, especially about sex. VDH offers a "Talk 2 Me" tool kit, designed to help you talk to your teen about sexuality and relationships. Order a free tool kit at [www.vatalk2me.org](http://www.vatalk2me.org). Establish "family time" to eat and play together. Ask how their day went. Let them know what's important to you and learn what's important to them.
- **Prevent Bullying and Dating Violence** – No one deserves to be abused. Teach your child the proper time and way to ask for help with bullies. Tell children not to cheer on or even watch a conflict with a bully. For more tips visit [www.vahealth.org/civp/topics/bullying.asp](http://www.vahealth.org/civp/topics/bullying.asp). Teach your teens the basic rules for healthy dating and encourage them to talk to you about their relationships. More tips are available at [www.vahealth.org/civp/topics/teendatingviolence.asp](http://www.vahealth.org/civp/topics/teendatingviolence.asp).

Here are some age-specific tips for children from elementary school to high school:

- Establish a regular routine of school, play, family time and rest for elementary school children. They'll be healthier and better behaved. For more on helping your child succeed in school visit [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org).
- Talk to your middle school students about the changes their bodies are going through, and encourage them to come to you first with questions. Let them know they can ask you anything. For tips on understanding and talking to your adolescent visit [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/teendevlopment.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/teendevlopment.html).
- Reinforce driver safety with your high school-age kids: always wear seat belt, don't run red lights, don't drink and drive, and obey the speed limit. Find more tips at [www.safeteendriving.com](http://www.safeteendriving.com).

For more information about keeping your family safe and healthy throughout the year, visit the VDH Web site at [www.vdh.virginia.gov](http://www.vdh.virginia.gov).

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